

Neshoba County Fair Speech
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Thank you for that wonderful welcome. It's great to be back at the Neshoba County Fair. Every year, I'm reminded how the Fair means different things to different people. For some it's the midway ... or the horse racing ... or just sitting on a porch visiting with friends and family. But for many of you who listen to the speeches at this historic pavilion, the Fair is for politics.

Every Fair before an election year, it seems the focus is on who's running for what. Who's going to run for Governor? For Lieutenant Governor? For Supervisor or Sheriff? That's why I wasn't really surprised when a lady came up to me this morning and asked, "Governor, what are you running for?"

I told her, "I know what I want to be running for ... the buffet."

But I can't do that these days. Your Governor is trying to lose a little weight. You may have heard we've kicked off a "Healthy Mississippi" campaign and I'm trying to lead by example.

No more thinking that a balanced diet means holding a cookie in each hand.

I'm sorry Marsha isn't here with me today; she's still at home recuperating from back surgery. She made me promise to tell you how deeply she and I appreciate your thoughts and prayers. She's making good progress and I am very proud of her.

She'll be glad to hear that at the very least, I'll sweat off a couple of pounds today. While I haven't seen any of the "Don't Feed the Governor" buttons she was handing out a couple of years ago, I know some of them must still be around here somewhere.

I'm proud that I've managing to drop a few pounds, by the heat or otherwise, but I'm even prouder of how the effort seems to have caught on with others.

Just the other day, Representative Steve Holland called me to say how interested he was in helping out. Some of y'all may not know Steve, but he's a State Representative from up around Tupelo and he has a waistline about the same size as mine, maybe even a little bigger.

Steve told me how he and the Speaker of the House had been thinking hard about how they could help make Mississippi healthier, so they went to where they do their best thinking ... driving up and down the Natchez Trace.

Steve told me they had a great idea. It occurred to them that the state still has a beef plant we can't seem to get rid of. But in the spirit of a Healthy Mississippi, Steve said we could issue a few bonds and turn it into a tofu manufacturing facility. Might make as much sense.

Now even though that may not be a bad idea for a Healthy Mississippi, it's certainly not the best approach to job creation. Fortunately, we've implemented some other ideas that have helped create more and better jobs for our people.

When I took office, Mississippi had lost more than 38,000 jobs over the previous four years. 2 ½ years later, despite enduring the worst natural disaster in American history and 70,000 people filing for unemployment benefits in its wake, the number of people working has increased by 15,000. For the first time in 75 years, Mississippi is not last in the country in per capita personal income.

We're creating jobs by protecting small businesses from lawsuit abuse. After enacting what the Wall Street Journal called the most comprehensive tort reform bill in the country, businesses are not as afraid to invest in Mississippi.

A business won't come here or expand here if their employees can't get health care. Before tort reform, lawsuit abuse was forcing doctors to leave our state. After tort reform, the largest insurer of doctors in our state cut their rates for the first time in years and began writing new policies, the biggest health care insurer in Mississippi cut their rates, and new insurance providers entered Mississippi.

We're creating jobs by improving productivity through workforce development and job training. We've doubled the state workforce training budget and reorganized the Department of Employment Security so that we're no longer leaving millions of federal workforce training dollars on the table.

To better prepare our state for the 21st century economy, the Legislature approved Momentum Mississippi's recommendations to realign our economic development incentives to match the growth sectors of the economy and to provide incentives for higher paying jobs.

And we're balancing our budget without raising anybody's taxes. How? We put down the shovel that they had used to dig a more than \$700 million budget hole.

In the Fiscal Year that just ended, spending went up by only 1% even though our revenues went up by more than 10%. When revenues went up because more people are working in higher paying jobs, we fought back the urges of some to spend more money. Now, for the first time in three years, we're beginning to rebuild our rainy day fund. As every family knows, that's how you balance a budget.

In 2005, for the first time since 1987, our state paid off more debt than was issued, so our bonded indebtedness actually went down. This will provide financial relief to our kids and grandkids.

We reformed programs such as Medicaid. Now, to make sure that everyone that is on Medicaid is truly needy, you have to become eligible for Medicaid in person instead of by mail. This common-sense reform has helped reduce the size of our Medicaid rolls.

State government is running more efficiently. For example, the Mississippi Development Authority is working more prospects than ever even with an 11% smaller workforce.

Because we've done these things to get our budget back in line, we have some money in the bank. This allows us to respond when we're dealt an unexpected hand. When the federal government told us we had to change a 14 year old complicated financing scheme in our Medicaid program, I was able to propose cutting the total assessments on hospitals across the state by \$45 million and replacing those funds with direct taxpayer support. This plan will comply with the federal government's order and help the hospitals that serve our poorest patients. But it was only possible because we had gotten in our fiscal house in order.

While we're controlling spending, we're setting priorities. We are heavily investing in our number one priority – education.

Education is the number one economic development issue and it's the number one quality of life issue. That's why it's the top budget priority of state government.

Since I've been Governor, our public school teachers have received two consecutive 8% pay raises. In the upcoming 2006-2007 school year, teachers will be making an average of 30% more than they were six years ago with an average salary of more than \$40,000.

In the upcoming 2006-2007 school year, per student spending in our public schools will be approximately \$7800, a 22% increase since I took office. In that time, we've increased state support for our K-12 school districts through the Mississippi Adequate Education Program by \$323 million, or 19%.

We have restored the funding cuts our universities and communities suffered in the years before I became Governor. Support for Community Colleges has increased \$50 million, or 29%, including a doubling of state support for workforce training. Support for universities has increased \$93 million, or 16%.

Despite all of this, some folks say we're not spending enough. Some go even further and claim we have "cut" education.

If those folks had been at the Sermon on the Mount enjoying the loaves and fishes, they'd have complained there weren't any hushpuppies.

We'll keep increasing our investments in education at all levels, but if we are to achieve excellence in education; if we are to do something about our nearly 40% dropout rate; if we are to get a handle on discipline in our schools; it's going to take more than money.

We have to demand better results for the money we spend.

That's why, with the help of classroom teachers around the state, I'm proud that the Legislature approved my UpGrade Education proposal this past spring.

In the upcoming school year, for the first time, local school leaders will be free to make innovative decisions about how to run their schools without checking with officials in Jackson first.

In the upcoming school year, for the first time, every student will have the opportunity to earn college credit in high school.

For the first time, the state will direct resources through private child care providers to ensure that our children are ready to learn by kindergarten.

For the first time, Mississippi is honestly acknowledging a 40% dropout rate and implementing plans to address it.

For the first time, thanks to the fresh, innovative, aggressive leadership of State Superintendent of Education Hank Bounds, we have the opportunity to shed traditional barriers and build a new education legacy.

Some say they want full funding for an "adequate" education program. I want smart funding for a superior education program that truly gives our students the tools they need to build successful, productive lives.

We're balancing the budget while making law enforcement a top priority.

After being cut 41% earlier this decade, we have increased the drug enforcement budget by 20% over the last 2 ½ years.

I've signed new laws to give prosecutors and law enforcement new tools in the fight against crystal meth and other drugs and to protect our kids from sexual predators. Sex offenders now have to re-register face-to-face every 90 days. This has helped Mississippi have one of the lowest non-compliance rates in the country for sex offenders.

We're putting more Highway Patrol officers on the road, including 43 new troopers. Another Highway Patrol School is planned for next month. And I signed into law the largest pay raise for state troopers in Highway Patrol history.

We're working to create more and better jobs, to improve education, to make our communities safer, to pursue a Healthy Mississippi, and to build stronger families.

That's a big part of how I see the job of Governor...working together to identify problems and then working together for solutions.

Simply put – it's about making promises and keeping them. When I ran for Governor I made promises to you, and I'm working every day with the Legislature and people across the state to keep them in what has been a successful team effort.

But there are some things I didn't foresee three years ago.

There's no way I could fully prepare myself for meeting with the family of a National Guardsman who had given his or her life in the service of our country. But through the sadness of a patriot's sacrifice inevitably comes the pride of a family who know they raised a hero. And that parent's pride fills you up inside.

And even though we could and did prepare for the possibility of a natural or manmade disaster, I could not have imagined looking in the eyes of a Hancock County child who had lost everything she had ever known to the worst natural disaster in our nation's history.

Not in my worst nightmare could I have imagined listening to thousands of Mississippians of all races and from all backgrounds who lost all of their worldly possessions. Or, hearing the common thread of all their stories: Pride, courage, spirit. So many acts of selflessness and generosity might seem uncommon to someone from somewhere else, but it's only natural in Mississippi.

Katrina was a horrible, devastating monster of a storm that left utter devastation its wake. But Mississippi is rebuilding bigger and better and ever. Our people have picked themselves up, hitched up their britches, and are moving forward. It's what we do.

We've picked up almost all the debris in record time and more than 100,000 people are living in temporary housing that allows them to be closer to their schools, their community and their jobs.

An unprecedented amount of resources has been made available by the federal government accompanied with unprecedented flexibility. For this we thank Senator Cochran, Senator Lott, the rest of our congressional delegation and President Bush.

In addition to the help from the state and federal governments, almost \$15 billion has already made its way to South Mississippi in the form of insurance payments and housing and small business assistance.

We still have a long way to go, but the tools are being put in place. There will be more bumps in the road, but I see the light ahead. It's hard to miss the light of the potential renaissance all across our state because it's reflected in the faces of our people.

Our people are strong, resilient, and self-reliant. They may get knocked down, but they pick themselves up to help themselves and to help their neighbors.

Katrina was a reminder of the greatness of a Mississippi spirit which can be seen from Southaven to Saucier, from Bay St. Louis to Burnsville, and from Natchez to Neshoba County. Let's use this reminder of the greatness of our people to lift our expectations for tomorrow for all of Mississippi so that we can work together to build a better future.

The great honor of my life is serving as your Governor. Thank you for that opportunity. May God Bless Mississippi and may God bless America.